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SIX BALLADS

ABOUT

KING ARTHUR









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# KING ARTHUR









A vision to King Arthur came,  
Warning him not to fight.

Gawaine, surrounded by a troop  
Of ladies fair and bright.

SIX PARTS

KING OF THE

LONDON

280. o. 696.

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SIX BALLADS  
ABOUT  
KING ARTHUR



LONDON  
KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, & CO., 1 PATERNOSTER SQUARE  
1881

280. o. 696.

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*MY DEAR CHILDREN*

*I strung the following lines together hoping to give you pleasure. The stories are taken from a book called 'Morte d'Arthur' which you will read when you are older, and will see that I have often used the very words of the translator*

*YOUR LOVING GRANNY*



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*THE BIRTH OF KING ARTHUR.*

‘To horse! to horse! my noble lord,’  
Thus spake the fair Igraine,  
‘Ride hard—ride fast all through the night,  
Nor stay, nor slack the rein.’

‘Now why such haste to leave the Court?’  
The Duke of Cornwall cried.  
‘Ah me,’ she said, ‘King Uther wills  
Thy wife should be his bride.’

Fast, fast they rode all through the night,  
Nor stayed, nor slacked the rein,  
Until the towers of Tintagel  
Rose shining o’er the plain.

But on the morrow, messengers  
Came riding from the King :  
' Uther Pendragon bids the Duke  
Himself and wife to bring

Back to fair London town.'—' Unto  
The King this answer give :  
Nor self nor wife shall tread his halls  
So long as either live.'

Then sware the King a dreadful oath,  
Or ere the fortieth day  
He would unearth him from his lair,  
And waste, and burn, and slay.

Alack for right 'gainst regal might !  
It boots but ill to tell  
How in a sally 'gainst the King  
The brave Duke Cornwall fell.

THE BIRTH OF KING ARTHUR. 3

The towers he manned, the wife he loved,  
Became King Uther's prey,  
And from her home at Tintagel  
Igraine was borne away.

And when her baby boy was born,  
In cloth of gold with state  
'Twas given to a beggar-man,  
Who waited at the gate.

But this was Merlin, in disguise  
Of beggar old and grey,  
The great enchanter, Merlin hight,  
Who bore the babe away

Unto a holy, saintly man,  
Who christened him by name  
Of Arthur—prince of chivalry,  
First on the scroll of fame.

4      THE BIRTH OF KING ARTHUR.

And good Sir Ector's noble wife  
    Nurtured the baby fair,  
And brought him up in gentle ways,  
    Befitting England's heir.

Eftsoons King Uther sickened  
    And fell in woful plight ;  
He spake to none or great or small,  
    By day nor eke by night.

Then Merlin rose in council full,  
    And spake both loud and high :  
'God's will be done, but I will make  
    Him speak or ere he die !'

So in hot haste, without delay,  
    Unto the King he hied,  
Knelt down beside the royal couch :  
    'Wilt thou, O Sire,' he cried

‘ That Arthur, thy own son, shall rule  
O’er England in thy stead ? ’  
The noble vassals gathered round,  
Listening astonishèd.

For naught knew they of infant son,  
But every Baron there  
Mighty of men, and strong of arm,  
Wended to be the heir.

King Uther Pendragon turned round  
Upon his dying bed,  
And to the knights assembled there  
And to great Merlin said :

‘ May God Almighty bless my son !  
I, too, my blessing give ;  
Bid him use fitting holy prayers  
That my poor soul may live ;

6      THE BIRTH OF KING ARTHUR.

‘ And claim the crown right worshipful  
    On pain of blessing lost.’  
With that he turned him o’er again,  
    And yielded up the ghost.

They buried him with regal pomp,  
    While all his Barons wept,  
As did Igraine, his beauteous queen—  
    But Uther calmly slept.

*ARTHUR MADE KING.*

WHEN Uther passed away, the realm  
Fell in great jeopardy,  
For many wended to be king  
Through might and bravery.

Then Merlin to the Archbishop  
Of Canterbury went,  
And they together council took  
This evil to prevent.

Thus they agreed—that every lord,  
On pain of curses deep,  
And every gentleman-at-arms  
A solemn tryst should keep,



On Christmas day, at London town,  
Since Christ, as all do know,  
Was then created Lord of all  
The kingdoms here below ;  
So who should reign o'er England fair  
By miracle might show.

Some nobles made them passing clean  
From vice or crime, for fear  
Their prayers might enter gracelessly  
Within Christ Jesus' ear.

Inside the church on Christmas day  
(It was St. Paul's, I ween),  
A mighty host of knights and lords  
And commoners is seen.

But ere they read the early mass,  
Or early matins sing,  
Unto the Lord Archbishop there  
This startling news they bring :

‘ Outside, within the churchyard gate,  
Near to the altar stone,  
There stands a large square marble slab  
With anvil perched thereon ;

‘ And in the anvil, of pure steel  
A naked sword doth sit,  
Of finest point, and all around  
Are golden letters writ :

“ Whoso from out this marble stone  
With his own powerful hand  
Shall pluck this sword, he shall be Lord  
And King of all England.”’

The Lord Archbishop ordered then  
That none should touch the stone,  
But all within the church should pray  
Until High Mass was done,

And when all prayers were finished  
    (This was his Grace's will),  
Ten knights of stainless troth and fame  
    Should guard the sword from ill ;

That jousts and tournaments be held  
    Upon the New Year's day ;  
That all who willed their prowess try  
    To pluck the sword away.

Thereto there flocked a gallant host  
    Of knights and ladies gay ;  
Sir Ector brought young Arthur there,  
    And his own son, Sir Kay.

But then befel a woful chance—  
    Sir Kay had lost his sword,  
In sooth, had left it at his home.  
    Then uttered he this word :

' O foster brother ! backward speed,  
Ride fast for love of me,  
And when thou reachest Ector's house,  
My sword bring back to me.'

' That will I,' said the gallant youth,  
Riding away alone ;  
But when he reached the castle gate  
He found the wardour gone,

And all the inmates, great and small,  
Off to the tournament ;  
Baffled and wroth he turned his horse  
And to the churchyard went.

' Ten thousand pities 'twere,' he said,  
' My dearest brother Kay  
Should at the joust withouten sword  
Appear in disarray.

Whereat he lighted from his horse,  
And tied it to the stile,  
While to the tent he bent his steps  
And loitered there awhile,

To see if the ten guards were there—  
He recked not that they went  
With all the world, both rich and poor,  
To the great tournament.

So when he found no knights were there  
But to the jousting gone,  
Lightly yet fierce the sword he seized,  
And pulled it from the stone,

And to Sir Kay delivered it,  
Who wist, as soon as seen,  
That 'twas the sword from out the stone ;  
Then said, ' Full well I ween

I have the sword, and I must be  
The King of all England.  
But when he showed it to his sire  
Sir Ector gave command

That to the church he should repair  
And swear upon the book  
How gat he then the sword ; but he,  
Fearing his sire's rebuke,

Told how his foster brother came  
When all the knights were gone,  
And light and fiercely plucked the sword  
From out the magic stone.

'Now try again,' Sir Ector said ;  
Whereat they all assayed,  
But none save Arthur there availed  
To sunder out the blade.

And thrice again he made assay,  
And thrice the sword came free ;  
Sir Ector and Sir Kay fell down  
Upon their bended knee.  
' O father ! why,' young Arthur said,  
' Your homage pay to me ?'

' Because that God has willed it so.  
Thou art no son of mine :  
'Twas Merlin brought thee to my arms  
From some far nobler line.

' But, O my liege ! for King thou art,  
Wilt thou to mine and me,  
Who nurtured thee and brought thee up,  
A gracious sovereign be ?'

But Arthur wept and made great dole  
At what Sir Ector said,  
That he no sire or mother had,  
Then sweetly answerèd :

'Else were I much to blame! I am  
Beholden so to you,  
Command me, and may God me help  
I will your bidding do.'

'Sir,' said Sir Ector, 'I will ask  
No more than that of all  
The lands you govern, my son Kay  
Be made the Seneschal.'

Replied young Arthur, 'That shall be ;  
I here my promise give,  
That none but he that office fill  
While he or I shall live.'

Then happèd it that on Twelfth day  
The Barons all assay  
To pluck the sword, but none prevail  
Save Arthur on that day.



Then waxed they wroth, and Candlemas  
Was fixed for the assay,  
Yet still no knight but Arthur  
Could pluck the sword away.

Then at high feast of Eastertide,  
Also at Pentecost,  
None but young Arthur loosed the sword--  
The knights their temper lost.

But when the Lord Archbishop came,  
All cried with one accord,  
'We will have Arthur for our King;  
God wills him for our lord.'

And down on bended knee they fell  
To pay him homage due ;  
And thus he won Excalibur  
And all fair England too.

Soon Scotland, and the North, and Wales,  
To him obeisance made,  
Won by the prowess of his knights  
And of his trusty blade.



### *THE MESSAGE.*

ON battlemented Camelot  
The moon was softly sleeping ;  
Within, King Arthur's noble knights  
Their wassail late were keeping.

'What ho! Sir Wardour, ope the gate,  
And let the drawbridge down ;  
I bear a message to your lord  
From Ryence of renown.'

Then up and spake the white-haired thrafl  
That kept the castle gate,  
'It ill befits our courtesy  
To one who comes so late,

‘ Who travel-stained and weary seems,  
To bar his entry free ;  
But tell me first your quest, I pray,  
And who may Ryence be ? ’

‘ My quest I tell but to thy chief :  
Enough for thee, I ween,  
That Ryence reigns o’er Wales, and eke  
O’er Ireland’s mountains green,  
And isles unnumbered round about,  
Now glittering in the sheen.’

The wardour oped the castle door,  
And let the drawbridge down ;  
The herald crossed in silence o’er,  
And entered with a frown,

And when within the banquet hall,  
He never bowed the head,  
Nor bent the knee, but strode right on  
And to King Arthur said :

‘ King Ryence vanquished in fair fight  
Twice six good kings save one ;  
He summons *thee* that one to be,  
Or proffers thee a boon.

‘ He bids thee here on bended knee  
Thy lawful homage pay,  
Or he will come with fire and sword  
To waste, and burn, and slay.

‘ King Ryence hath a sammet cloak  
All purfled round with hair—  
With human hair torn from the chin:  
Of kings he slew in war.

‘ But still there is one little spot  
Uncovered at the base :  
Flay thou thy chin, and send thy beard  
To fill the vacant place.’

Then started up King Arthur's knights  
Indignant at this word ;  
Each stamped his mailed heel in ire,  
Each drew his trusty sword.

King Arthur rose with manly grace  
And to the herald spake,  
' Quail not before my noble knights,  
But back this answer take :

' Say that of all the messages  
E'er sent from king to king,  
This is the shamefullest and worst  
That herald e'er did bring.

' 'Tis plain Ryence has never been  
In knightly company ;  
He lacks the soul—he lacks the speech  
Of common courtesy.

‘Tell him, no homage do I owe,  
Nor sire nor kith of mine ;  
As for my beard, it is too scant  
To purple cloak so fine ;

‘ And if he come, as now he boasts,  
With fire and sword to slay,  
On *both* his bended knees he shall  
To *me* his homage pay.’

The herald left the hall—the King  
Thus broke the deep silence :  
‘ Now is there any here,’ he said,  
‘ That knoweth King Ryence ? ’

Then answered him one hight Naram,  
‘ I know him passing well ;  
In body few can match his strength,  
In pride none him excel.



'I doubt not he will war with you

Full strong and powerfully.'

'Well !' said the King, 'I will ordain

For him, as he shall see.'

***THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.***

**THEN** happed it on Allhallowmas,

That Bors, the King of Gaul,  
And Ban of Benwick, over seas,  
Came at King Arthur's call.

**They** came with full three hundred knights,

All chosen, brave, and true,  
To vanquish Arthur's enemies  
Who fierce and fiercer grew.

**And** while they kept high festival

Beneathen cloth of gold,  
A thrall came riding in hot haste  
And woful tidings told ;

26 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

How that King Ryence of North Wales  
Had gone with sword and lance  
From out his mountain fastnesses  
'Gainst King Leodogrance.

Now Arthur loved this king for aid  
In war, and friendly troth,  
But hated Ryence of North Wales,  
So at this news was wroth.

King Bors and Ban made ready then  
Their chivalry from France,  
And all the country rose in arms  
To aid Leodogrance.

Full twenty thousand men-at-arms  
Rode with King Arthur hard,  
Until within six days they reached  
The towers of Cameliard.

And then and there the mighty host  
Engaged in dreadful fight,  
They slaughtered twice five thousand souls  
And put Ryence to flight.

'Twas then King Arthur first beheld  
The lovely Guinever,  
The King's fair daughter—ever since  
He loved but only her.

When that the kingdom freedom gat  
From wars and jealous strife,  
The barons begged King Arthur then  
To wed a loving wife.

With Merlin too was counsel ta'en,  
Who deemed it good and wise,  
And asked the King if any maid  
Found favour in his eyes.

28 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

Then answered Arthur, ' There is one,  
I deem her passing fair,  
The daughter of my trusty friend,  
The lovely Guinever.

' To him my father gave a prize  
I value more than gold,  
The huge Round Table at whose board  
Sate knights a hundred told

' And fifty more.' ' Sir,' Merlin said,  
' I grant you passing well,  
For beauty and for fairness too  
No maid can her excel.

' But an ye loved her not, I could  
Another damsel find,  
Whose beauty and whose goodness should  
Be equal in your mind.

‘ But ’tis not meet a man should wed  
Where he can feel no love ;  
For where his heart is set, he will  
Be quick his feet to move.’

‘ Ah! that is true,’ the King replied,  
Nor list what Merlin said,  
How grief and sorrow would ensue  
If he the maid should wed,

But sent him to Leodogrance,  
In goodly company,  
To plead his suit, and ask the King  
What might his pleasure be ?

Leodogrance was overjoyed  
To welcome Merlin’s suite,  
Exclaiming that it pleased him well  
Arthur’s demands to meet.

30 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

But said, 'What can I proffer him  
With Guinever for dower?  
For gold and land he does not lack,  
He has such ample store.

'But I the huge Round Table have,  
Uther Pendragon gave  
To me his trusted friend, and that  
His son shall gladly have.

'Alack for hap and woful change!  
Full many a gallant knight  
Who sate thereat has perished since,  
Slain in the bloody fight.

'But still a hundred knights remain,  
My faithful bodyguard;  
They shall escort my daughter when  
She leaveth Cameliard.'

THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR. 31

So Merlin, knights, and Guinever  
Journeyed by land and sea,  
Till they came nigh to London town,  
A goodly company.

Then did King Arthur joy to see  
The cavalcade arrive,  
Bearing the Table that he prized  
And Guinever to wive.

He spake out openly and loud,  
‘ This maid I long have loved,  
And more than land or precious gold  
These gifts my heart have moved.

‘ For nothing is so lief to me  
As Guinever the fair ;  
To wed her, and to crown her queen,  
We quickly will prepare.



32 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

‘ Let Merlin search through all the land  
If fifty knights be found,  
To fill the places vacant left  
Beside the Table Round.’

But only eight-and-twenty knights  
Of prowess and good fame  
Could Merlin find to fill the seats.  
Then Canterbury came—

He came with pomp right royally  
To bless the seats in state ;  
Upon each chair, the while he prayed,  
The eight-and-twenty sate.

When they arose and homage paid  
To Arthur, as was fit,  
Were golden letters found on each,  
Telling who there should sit.

But two were void, and so anon  
Came riding young Gawaine,  
To beg the king to dub him knight,  
Nor did he beg in vain

Then forthwithal a poor man came,  
And with him his fair son :  
' Oh, where shall I King Arthur find ? '  
He questioned every one.

' Yonder he stands—what wilt with him ? '  
Down on his bended knee  
He dropped and said, ' O blessed King !  
O flower of chivalry !

' May Jesu save thee ! here I come  
A humble suppliant,  
Hearing that on your wedding-day  
Ye any boon would grant.

34 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

‘ Sir, I have thirteen stalwart sons,  
Who labour all the year,  
And do my bidding passing well ;  
But this thou seest here

‘ Will nothing do but bend the bow,  
And cast the dart afar ;  
He loves to watch the feasts and games,  
And mix where battles are.

‘ Make him, my King, a gallant knight.’  
‘ ’Tis sooner said than done,’  
Arthur replied ; but all the while  
He watchèd well the son,

And found that he fair-visaged was,  
And passingly well made.

‘ What is thy name, and where thy sword ? ’  
He to the young man said.

THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR. 35

‘ My name is Tor, and here my sword.’

‘ Unsheath it and alight.’

The youth leaped from his meagre steed,

Kneeling in Arthur’s sight.

‘ Oh make me, sir, a knight, I pray,

Knight of the Table Round !’

Smiting him on the neck with sword,

‘ May’st thou be ever found,’

King Arthur said, ‘ I pray to God,

A good knight and a true !

But to be knight of Table Round

Lacks worth and prowess too.’

And then there happed a wondrous sight ;

For when the King was wed

All solemnly at Camelot,

And the high feast was made,

36 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

By Merlin's order every knight  
Sat silent, one and all,  
Each in his siege in solemn state  
Within the banquet hall.

Till, as the portals open flew,  
Rushed in a hart milk-white,  
A snow-white brachet followed on,  
And then, O wondrous sight !

Twice thirty coal-black hounds pursued  
The hart with yell and cry,  
And when the brachet wounded her  
She moanèd piteously,

And gave a sudden bound that threw  
One knight upon the ground,  
Wherefrom he soon arose and seized  
By force the snow white hound.

Quick out of hall, he leaped to horse,  
    Bearing his prize away,  
Riding as if for life and death,  
    That no man could him stay.

Anon there came on palfrey white  
    A lady fair and gay,  
Who begged the King to give her back  
    Her brachet stolen away.

That can I not,' said Arthur. Then  
    A knight in full array  
Came riding in, armed cap-a-pie  
    And bore the maid away.

By force he snatched her that she made  
    Such dole with shriek and cry,  
That all within the banquet hall  
    Rejoiced to see them fly.

38 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

Then Merlin spake : ' Ye may not treat  
These shames as poor and slight,  
Else much disworship will arise  
To King and every knight

' Belonging to the Table Round ;  
But order noble men,  
Gawaine, and Pellinore, and Tor,  
To fetch them back again.'

' That will I,' said the King. ' Gawaine,  
Bring back the milk-white hart.  
To you, King Pellinore, behoves  
To play a nobler part :

' The Knight and Lady you shall meet  
In war and fearful strife ;  
Bring them again before this court,  
Or sacrifice their life.

‘ And you, Sir Tor, your valour test,  
And knightly honour gain,  
For bringing back the brachet white  
Within this hall again.’

It little boots me now to tell  
How each one’s work was sped ;  
Suffice it that they all returned  
Their task accomplishèd.

Then Arthur stablished all the knights ;  
To such as were too poor  
He granted lands and tenements  
Dividing all his store.

And solemnly he charged them all  
No outrage e’er to do,  
Murder, and cruelty, and vice,  
And treason to eschew.



40 THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR.

He said, ' To him that asketh you  
Mercy and pardon give,  
Under the ban of forfeiting  
My service while ye live ;

' The penalty of death be yours,  
If damsels in distress  
Or gentlewomen plead in vain  
For succour or redress.

' And let no man for worldly goods,  
Or lands, or sordid pelf,  
In wrongful quarrel battle make  
Or glorify himself.

' Swear,' said King Arthur—every knight  
Uprose to do his will—  
' Swear faithfully and loyally  
My precepts to fulfil.'

THE MARRIAGE OF KING ARTHUR. 41

'Twas done—in every future year,  
As Pentecost came by,  
King Arthur's knights were bound by oath  
To truth and chivalry.

And thus was stablished in our land  
Honour and loyalty ;  
Long may they last, nor ever fail  
Till time itself shall die !

He said, ' To him that asketh you  
    Mercy and pardon give,  
Under the ban of forfeiting  
    My service while ye live ;

' The penalty of death be yours,  
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Or gentlewomen plead in vain  
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Till time itself shall die !

But lo ! through window opened wide,  
Without or voice or sound,  
A gentle dove came gliding in,  
And floated round and round.

Within her beak a censer hung  
Cast in pure molten gold,  
Whence clouds of fragrance issued forth  
Which o'er the table rolled.

It seemed as Araby the blest,  
And every spicy isle,  
Had garnered all their treasures up,  
To waft them there the while.

And forthwithal upon the board  
All kinds of meats were spread,  
And drinks that might the palate please  
Were likewise furnishèd.

A damsel passing fair and young,  
Most beauteous to behold,  
Came gliding in—betwixt her hands  
She bare a vase of gold.

And thereunto the King kneeled down,  
Devoutly and with grace,  
To say his prayers, as also did  
Each soul within the place.

Then spake Sir Lancelot du Lake  
And asked of the King,  
‘What may this mean? I pray you tell.’  
‘This is the richest thing,’

Replied King Pelles, ‘that a man  
Can own, alive or dead;  
E’en the Round Table, when this comes,  
Shall be abolishèd.

‘ And wit thou well, thou here hast seen  
The holy Sangreal—  
The blessed gift—the cherished hope  
Sought for and prayed of all.’

In after years when Lancelot  
Had wedded sweet Elaine,  
King Pelles’ child, within those walls,  
The wonder happed again.

For Lancelot’s nephew, young Sir Bors,  
To Corben Castle rode,  
And in the banquet-hall he saw  
Elaine, just where she stood,

Her baby on her arm ; and when  
She said the lovely boy  
Was Lancelot’s child, he kneelèd down  
And wept for very joy,

And prayed to God, that when the child  
    To years of manhood grew,  
He might prove worthy of his sire,  
    As brave a knight and true.

Then through the window opened wide,  
    Without or voice or sound,  
A gentle dove came gliding in,  
    And floated round and round.

Within her beak a censer hung  
    Formed of pure molten gold,  
Whence clouds of fragrance issued forth,  
    Which o'er the table rolled.

It seemed as Araby the blest,  
    And every spicy isle,  
Had garnered all their treasures up  
    To waft them there awhile.



And forthwithal upon the board  
All kinds of meats were spread,  
And drinks that might the palate please  
Were also furnished.

A damsel passing fair and young,  
Most beauteous to behold,  
Came gliding in, betwixt her hands  
Bearing a vase of gold.

She spake, 'This babe Sir Galahad,  
Sir Bors, I bid you wit,  
In future on Siege Perilous  
As knight shall surely sit—

'A nobler knight than is his sire'—  
Her words rang through the hall—  
'For as he lives, he surely shall  
Achieve the Sancgreal.'

She vanished then. As of afore,  
King Pelles spoke out loud :  
' No knight shall win, or honour have,  
Save he that loveth God.

' Be he a knight of high degree,  
Or be he e'er so brave,  
An he nor love nor feareth God,  
No honour shall he have.'

Replied Sir Bors, ' Within these halls  
(I wot not what they mean)  
Most strange and weird adventures hap,  
And wondrous sights are seen.  
I will be shriven with good will  
And be confessèd clean.'

So was he shriven of his sins,  
And in the dead of night  
Most marvellous adventures happed,  
Too lengthy here to write.

When morning broke, to Camelot  
He spurred his gallant steed ;  
For Arthur had returned from France  
Victorious, and decreed

That feasts and tournaments be held  
Upon that very day,  
And all his knights at Table Round  
Should sit in full array.

But when uncovered was the siege  
Hight Perilous, behold,  
The name of young Sir Galahad  
Shone forth in molten gold.

But no one at the Table wot  
Who Galahad might be,  
Till long years afterward he came  
Out from the nunnery

Where holy women reared the child  
Till he to manhood grew,  
And taught him to be good and wise,  
Noble, and brave, and true.

At Pentecost, he having first  
Performed the holy rite,  
On bended knee he begged to be  
Installèd as a knight.

Sir Lancelot surveyed the youth,  
And found him passing fair,  
With limbs well knit, of stature tall,  
Graceful beyond compare.

He struck him with his sword, and said,  
' Sir Galahad, arise !  
God grant the virtue ne'er may fade  
Now shining through your eyes ! '

Sir Galahad then hasted forth,  
To joust withouten shield ;  
He broke their spears, he threw the knights  
Save twain who would not yield.

He then unhorsed, unlaced his helm  
At Guinever's request,  
Who, looking on his visage, spake,  
' No marvel he is best

' At jousting and at holy prayer ;  
For, as you plainly see,  
His face and mien bespeak him sprung  
From true nobility.'

Then all to the great minster sped  
To offer evensong,  
King, Queen, the knights of Table Round,  
With all the motley throng.

Then back to Camelot to sup,  
Where in the lofty hall,  
Each sitting as toforehand, lo !  
This marvel did befall :

The thunder growled, and cracked ahead  
As though the walls would rive.  
Each knight made sign of cross, as though  
The priest had stood to shrive.

But in the midst of crash and blast  
A sunbeam entered there,  
By seven times brighter than the day,  
When day is bright and clear.

It shed such lustre over all,  
Each scanned his neighbour o'er ;  
And each seemed fairer in that light  
Than e'er he seemed before.

No word was spoke, no sound was made,  
As they all dumb had been :  
The holy Grail in white samite  
Came softly gliding in.

And as afore the hall was filled  
With perfumes where it moved,  
And every knight had meats and drinks  
As each one wished and loved.

As quickly as it glided in,  
It quick evanishèd ;  
None knew from whence or whitherward  
The holy vision fled.

King Arthur rose with reverence,  
Bowing full low his head :  
' Thank Jesu Christ our Lord for this  
So precious boon,' he said.

Then up and spake Gawaine, 'I vow  
By all I hold most dear,  
In quest of this most holy Grail,  
To wander for a year.

' And eke a day nor e'er return  
Until it reappear  
Unto my longing eyes more bright  
And openly than here !'

Then rose up all the knights around,  
And vowed, with one accord,  
With heart and soul to join the quest,  
For love of Christ their Lord.

King Arthur spake with troubled mien,  
' Alas ! Gawaine, Gawaine !  
With this avow and promise made,  
Ye have me well nigh slain.



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This spake he, with the gathering tears  
Slow trembling in his eyes,  
Fresh from his o'ercharged heart, so full  
Of loving memories.

Next morn, the band of gallant knights  
Through the great minster pass,  
And kneel below the altar stair  
To celebrate the mass.

And then 'to horse!' The eager crowd  
Are gathering far and near ;  
Maidens forlorn and gentlefolk  
With wistful eyes are there :

The rich, the poor, the camp, the court,  
Arthur and Guinever ;  
They bid farewell with many a sob  
And many a bitter tear.

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*THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR.*

FALSE Mordred spake to Guinever,  
    ‘ Arthur, thy lord, is dead,  
And has appointed me to reign  
    O'er England in his stead.

‘ We will be crowned right royally.  
    To Canterbury haste ;  
We there high festival will make  
    For fifteen days at least,

‘ And thou shalt be my wedded wife.’  
    She shrank in mute dismay,  
Knowing King Arthur had embarked  
    His troops from Cardiff Bay :

60 THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR.

Full threescore thousand gallant men,  
With his tried friend Gawaine,  
To 'venge an insult, they had gone  
To Benwick over main.

And now, poor Guinever, take heart ;  
Brush back thy bitter tears ;  
Trust in thy subtle woman's wit  
Born of thy woman's fears.

She answered him in gentle guise,  
' I may not say thee nay,  
But grant me that I journey first  
To London town, I pray,  
To buy some gauds and trinkets fine  
To grace my bridal day.'

False Mordred granted her request,  
In that she spake so fair ;  
Then quick she hied to London town,  
And bade her men repair

Unto the Tower, the which she filled  
With food, and arms, and men,  
Nor aught that Mordred said or did  
Could lure her forth again.

He sued her with false honeyed words,  
They did not once prevail ;  
He stormed the Tower with mighty guns,  
It was of no avail.

Within her fortress Guinever  
Sent scornful answers true :  
'Thou art a traitor to thy king,  
Which thou full soon shalt rue.

'Ere I come forth to thee, false knight,  
E'en though my lord be dead,  
I liever by this sword will die  
Than ever I thee wed.'

When Mordred heard that Arthur's host  
Was coming over sea,  
In eager haste to be avenged  
For this foul treachery,

He writ to all the barons round  
To come from far and near,  
And studied words of treason dark  
He whispered in their ear :

How that with Arthur evermore  
Was naught but war and strife,  
While he, Sir Mordred, gave them peace,  
And joy, and bliss of life.

Then many that King Arthur had  
Raised up from low estate,  
And granted lands, now slanderous words  
And evil 'gainst him spake.

Now, all ye Englishmen, behold  
What mischief happened here :  
This King, who was the noblest king,  
And knight withouten peer,

Who loved the fellowship of none  
But good and brave, who spent  
His life redressing crime and wrong,  
Was held in discontent.

This old, *old* custom of the land  
Is not forgot, they say,  
That Englishmen are ne'er content,  
Not even at this day.

This is their great default—no thing  
Pleaseth this people long.  
Thus happed it that false Mordred's force  
Waxed numerous and strong.



They met at Dover.    Arthur's fleet  
    Came sailing o'er the sea,  
Bearing its freight of human worth,  
    A goodly company.

Then was there launching of great boats  
    And small, in eager haste  
To lift King Arthur from the realm  
    Whereto God had him placed.

They rushed ashore—ah, woe is me  
    For many a noble slain,  
For barons bold, and gentle knights,  
    Among them Sir Gawaine.

When Arthur saw his sister's son  
    Fall with a deadly blow,  
He took him gently in his arms,  
    And kissed his pallid brow.

‘Gawaine,’ he cried, ‘my only joy !

I pray thee, do not die,

And leave me, in this cold bleak world,

To utter misery.

‘For now I will confess to thee

That I have loved thee so,

I cannot bear, withouten thee,

This life of grief and woe.’

The dying man thrice oped his eyes,

And gasped amid his pain

Some words of comfort to the King,

Then never spake again.

King Arthur mourned with bitter grief

The friend he loved so well,

At Dover Castle buried him

Within a small chapelle,

Where even to this day his skull

Is shown, as travellers tell.

Meanwhile the battle hurtled on  
Far as to Barham plain ;  
King Arthur's troops victorious  
Drave Mordred back again.

But then there happed a wondrous thing,  
For in the dead of night  
A vision to King Arthur came,  
Warning him not to fight.

Gawaine, surrounded by a troop  
Of ladies fair and bright,  
Whom he had rescued from foul wrong,  
Or aided in the right,

Thus spake : ' God sends us here to you  
His purpose to maintain ;  
For if you fight to-morrow morn,  
You surely will be slain.

‘Wait only till Sir Lancelot  
With aid shall reappear.’  
Thus having said, he vanished  
As into empty air.

In council it was then decreed  
That when the morrow came,  
When both the armies were afield,  
A herald should proclaim

A truce, with gold and lands in pledge,  
If Mordred would accede.  
The morning broke, the herald cried,  
Each party was agreed.

But each, mistrustful of his foe,  
Gave orders to his men  
To stand prepared for deadly fight,  
Should aught occur again

68 THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR.

To mar the truce. Just then from out  
Some heather on the right  
An adder glided forth, and stung  
Upon his foot a knight,

Who thought no harm, but drew his sword  
To strike the reptile dead,  
Whereat both armies yelled aloud  
As by one impulse led.

At sound of trumpets, beams, and horns,  
They hasted on to fight,  
And never in this Christian land  
Was seen more doleful sight.

Oh ! there was rushing, riding fast,  
And many a grim word spoke,  
Foining and striking everywhere,  
And many a deadly stroke.

They stinted not, but madly fought  
Through all that livelong day ;  
At night a hundred thousand dead  
Stark on the common lay.

When Arthur gazed across the down,  
And saw his valiant host  
All slain, save two poor wounded knights,  
He knew that all was lost.

‘ Jesu have mercy ! ’ cried the King ;  
‘ Would that I too had been  
Like these, my comrades, stricken dead,  
Ere I this day had seen !

‘ Now would to God I wist me where  
That traitor foul may be,  
Who brought such mischief to the realm  
And misery to me ! ’

Thereat he suddenly turned round,  
And spied, across the plain,  
False Mordred leaning on his sword  
Among a heap of slain.

Then cried he to a wounded knight  
Yclept Sir Bedevere,  
'Yonder I spy the traitor false.  
Give me my trusty spear ;

'For tide me life, or tide me death,  
I see him there alone  
He shall not 'scape my vengeance now  
As he before hath done.'

With both his hands he seized the spear,  
Crying, 'Thy hour is come—  
Die, traitor, die !' rushed headlong on,  
And drave the weapon home.

THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR. 71

But with his sword the dying man  
Smote Arthur on the head,  
Piercing his helmet to the brain,  
Then fell down stark and dead.

When noble Arthur fell to earth  
Thrice in a deadly swoon,  
Sir Lucan and Sir Bedevere  
Thrice raised him up, and soon

They led him on betwixt them both  
Softly and tenderly,  
Until they reached a chapel small  
Close by the moaning sea.

And while they sat and hearkened there,  
All in the broad moonlight,  
They saw the pillers on the down  
Rob many a noble knight



72 THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR.

Of brooch, and beads, and jewels rare,  
Of many a goodly ring,  
Which much distressed Sir Bedevere,  
Who begged the dying King

To haste to some securer spot,  
Where they could hide away.  
Arthur replied, ' My time flees fast,  
I have not long to stay.

' Now hie thee to yon waterside,  
And throw my trusty sword,  
My own Excalibur, therein,  
And quickly bring me word

' What there thou see'st.' ' It shall be done,'  
Replied the willing knight.  
But when he saw that noble sword,  
With precious stones bedight

On haft and pommel, to himself

He reasoned in this wise :

‘ If I destroy this richest sword,

But harm and loss arise,

‘ For an I throw it in the stream,

No good to him or me.’

Whereon he hid Excalibur

Under the nearest tree.

When he gat back unto the King,

‘ What saw’st thou there ? ’ quoth he.

‘ Naught but the waves and winds,’ he said,

‘ Moaning most dolefully.’

Then said King Arthur, ‘ Truth is good,

To lie is deadly sin ;

As thou art lief and dear to me,

Go back and throw it in.’

74 THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR.

Sir Bedevere returned again,  
But thought it sin and shame  
To cast away the noble sword,  
So acted just the same.

He hid the sword amid the grass,  
Then, on his bended knee,  
Told Arthur his command was done.  
' Say then what didst thou see ? '

' Sire,' said he, ' I saw nothing there  
But the great waters wap,  
And the waves wan ; while I remained,  
Naught else to me did hap.'

' Ah, traitor ! ' said King Arthur, ' all  
Thou sayest is untrue ;  
Thou hast betrayed me twice, and now  
Thou would'st me quite undo.

‘ Who would have wend that thou, who  
wast

So lief and dear to me,  
And called a noble knight, for gain  
Should now deceitful be ?

‘ Go quickly hence. The cold strikes keen ;  
I have short time to stay ;  
An if thou disobey me now,  
I surely will thee slay.’

Thereat Sir Bedevere rushed forth ;  
Seizing the weapon fast,  
He bound the girdle round the hilt,  
And threw it in at last,

When lo ! an arm and hand appeared  
Above the watery grave,  
Caught at the sword, thrice brandished it,  
Then vanished in the wave.

When Arthur heard what had befell,  
He spake, ' Sir Bedevere,  
Alas ! Now help me hence ; I dread  
Too long I tarry here.'

He took the King upon his back,  
Close to the waterside,  
Where hovèd in, fast by the bank,  
A little barge he spied ;

Wherein there sate a stately queen,  
And many ladies fair,  
Who shrieked and wept for grief when they  
Beheld King Arthur there.

' Now put me in the barge,' he said,  
Which softly was obeyed ;  
Three queens in sable hoods therein  
Gently King Arthur laid.

Upon the lap of one of these  
His weary head he laid.  
'Why have ye tarried, brother dear,  
So long from me?' she said.

'Alas! the cold has stricken deep  
Into this wound, I fear;'  
And then they rowed far far away  
From sad Sir Bedevere.  
Their wailing floated on the wind,  
Most pitiful to hear.

Soon as the barge was lost to sight,  
Forlorn Sir Bedevere  
Wept and bemoaned the livelong night,  
Wandering about, in fear

Of armed foes and robbers vile,  
Through devious forest ways.  
When morning brake, a hermitage  
Met his bewildered gaze.

Close by a little chapel stood,  
Where holy men might pray ;  
Within, low grovelling on the ground,  
A saintly hermit lay

Beside a new-made grave. The knight  
Inquired in accents low,  
'What man is recent buried there  
Down in the grave below ?'

'Fair Sir,' the hermit then replied,  
'I wot not who he be ;  
A band of lovely ladies brought  
Him here last night to me.

'A hundred tapers, too, they brought,  
A hundred besants gave,  
To lay in earth his lovely form,  
His precious soul to save.'

‘ Alas ! that was my honoured lord,’  
Replied Sir Bedevere,  
‘ King Arthur, prince of chivalry,  
Who now lies buried here.’

Whereat he fell into a swoon.  
When he revived again,  
He begged the hermit piteously  
To let him there remain.

‘ In life or death I would be near,  
Nor evermore remove,  
By fasting and by prayer to show  
My loyalty and love.’

And then he doffed his knightly gear,  
Putting on mean array,  
And both together wept and prayed  
Their weary lives away.



80 THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR.

Queen Guinever became a nun  
In cloistered Almesbury,  
Spending her days in deeds of love  
And acts of charity.

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